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The Motions of Burying

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THE MOTIONS OF BURYING

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THE MOTIONS OF BURYING is a thesis comprised of 52 pages of poems and a five page introduction that explores personal connections to physical space and landscape. The poems included in this manuscript are representative of the places I've called home: the woods of Pennsylvania, where I grew up; barns and pastures in Central New York, where I spent several years working on small family farms; and the wide sky over Holmes Lake in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I now reside.

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INTRODUCTION

I'll start with killing the duck.

In August, a raccoon began sneaking into the barn. Every morning, I'd find large piles of its feces beside an empty bowl of cat food. Eventually, it found a hole in the wire of the chicken coop. It killed three chickens the first night.

We got a trap from the neighbors, patched the hole in the wire fencing, and didn't think much about the raccoon for the next two weeks. There were always, after all, a hundred other things to think about. The lettuce beds needed turning over. The lambs needed to be weaned, but they weren't eating enough grass yet. The plastic for the new greenhouse was still sitting in long unopened rolls beside the tomato plants, and weeds were starting to grow tall around them.

One morning, when I got to the barn, something felt different. I noted it but didn't investigate it; I opened the door to the chicken coop as usual to let out all the birds, then went deeper into the barn, into the microgreen room, to stow my lunch. Megan was already there watering trays, and we said our good morning's. As I stashed my bag and started gathering bins for the radish harvest that day, I realized what had felt off all morning: the animals were quiet. Usually, I could hear the chickens squawking even before I got out of my car. They'd be huddled at the door to the coop when I got to the barn, eager to be the first ones out. But when I opened the door that morning, there was no rush, no desperate push, no loud rooster announcing the day. Curious, I walked back outside to check on things, which is when I saw the duck.

I'll jump ahead here to say simply that the raccoon had come back during the night and killed three chickens and a mallard. The duck in the yard—a White Peking—

was alive, but barely. She was huddled in the middle of the lawn, her head and neck covered in blood; she looked like she had been skinned. When I got closer, I saw that her neck was gouged just above her wings. I thought, but wasn't sure, that I could see bone.

After some discussion, Taylor and I filled the plastic duck pool with water, hoping that she might rinse herself off and feel better. But when I set her down in the pool, she only bobbed a bit and then floated, holding as still as possible so that she wouldn't tip over. I remember shaking my head, then; we knew she wouldn't last the day. Taylor went to the barn to sharpen a small ax, and I sat by the pool, watching her float, talking to her, telling her that it was going to be okay.

I begin with this story for a few reasons. I begin with it because the story is a poem that I've been wanting to write, but haven't been able to; and yet it's an experience that has shaped and influenced many of my poems. Much of my work explores the relationship between animal and human, focusing especially on the daily business of animal caretaking in agriculture. Within that work, death is inevitable and familiar. Despite that, in my experience, it's often mournful—as in a farmer moving the body of a horse before sunrise so that no one else has to see it, or a woman holding a milk bottle to the mouth of a scouring lamb, hoping it will drink, but knowing that it won't. When I write about these deaths, I look for the moments *around* the death and write out of those:

> I squat in the grass
> to cradle her still-warm muzzle and guide her skull
> back through the fence while the other sheep watch,
> chewing mouthfuls of flowers.

It's in these moments, I believe, that we can see some of the places where what it means to be human intersects with what it means to be animal. I'm deeply interested in this blurred line. For me, it's a way of understanding, or meaning-making: to see through the eyes of an animal, and to imagine them seeing through my eyes.

These poems reflect moments when I've felt those deep connections between animal and human, as well as a sharp awareness of love for both. They are also representative of the deep appreciation I have for the people who care for animals, even at the cost of their physical and mental health:

> I think about those last handfuls of hay
> whether he smelled the summer in them
> and did crushed dandelions fall loose from the bale
> and did he sweep them into the gutter
> before turning to the next the heavier chore

These lines are from a poem written about Dean Pierson, a farmer who in 2009 shot each of his 51 milking cows before taking his own life. Pierson's story came to me four years ago, while I was working in Central New York on a small family dairy and produce farm. I knew immediately that I wanted to write about him, about his life and his death. Other writers have felt this too—drawn, I think, to the way his story highlights so much of the daily struggles of small scale dairy farmers. Peter Applebome, for the *New York Times*, begins: "Late in the afternoon, a light snow falling like frozen mist, the landscape of small dairy farms, grain silos and rolling fields is a study in gray and white, beautiful,

cold and ghostly." Applebome begins where many poets might: in the landscape, the pastoral scene.

I'm also drawn here time and time again, returning to the landscapes that have shaped me, and influenced, too, by the poets who first drew me to poetry, including Mary Oliver and Jane Hirshfield. Oliver and Hirshfield's work are so often driven by the natural world and their careful attention to observing it. Similarly, early on I was captured by the work of Jean Valentine and her short lines, which have the power of suspending a sharpened image in the floating white space of a page—a power I later tried to harness in poems like "Milkstone," "When the Horse Lies Down," and "Apology." Once I discovered poets like Adrienne Rich, Richard Siken, and Jorie Graham, though, I began to find the form that fits the landscapes which haunt me. Siken and Graham, in particular, introduced me to the long, meandering line, which echoes for me the sprawling hills of Pennsylvania and New York. Two of my own poems especially—"Pennsylvania Backwoods Elegy" and "Greenbrier"—showed me the potential for what a longer line can do. While not solely focused on the landscape, it's a driving force behind both poems, and the lines emphasize that in the way they use indentations to mimic curving backroads and switchbacks in a hiking trail.

Applebome, in his *New York Times* piece, paints a nice picture by beginning with the landscape. But that frozen pastoral image is complicated by the violence underneath it, which I find to be the more interesting story—the truer story. This kind of complication of the pastoral is something that I'm invested in as a writer. I'm also interested in the question that it raises about what the role of the poet is in these observations of the world:

I picture bright droplets of blood
scattered on the pine chips below us,

and I know—I'm ashamed to say it—
that it would be beautiful.

Here is a moment where I try and face some of the implications of what it means to walk through the world with a poet's eyes—to witness violence (or the possibility of violence) and to bring that into a poem without it serving a purpose beyond its shock value. When I tell the story of the duck in conversation, I can't help but linger on the exact moment of her death: how I held her down while Taylor swung the ax. How, after her head fell to the grass, her body lunged out of my hands and ran twelve feet across the lawn, neck swinging. It's hard not to feel like I'm sensationalizing the details, but these are the facts: that she ran. That after she stilled, I picked up her head by its beak and stared long and hard at her closed eyes. These details feel important to report, somehow, and maybe this is the reason that I haven't been able to write this poem—because her death, ultimately, was not about the way we had to kill her, and attempts at this poem have been failures because I haven't taken my own advice of writing *around* the death rather than through it. Maybe the poem actually exists in that silence that greeted me in the morning when I got to the barn—that silence which would have come after a bevy of noise, which no one witnessed.

Which brings me back to the careful eye of Jane Hirshfield and her attention to observation. This, ultimately, is the main thrust of my work, and allows for a better understanding of what captures me in writing about both animals and landscape—the physical features of the earth being, in a sense, a common denominator between human

and animal. We all roam the earth. And it's true, of course, that my relationship to land and landscape isn't the same as that of the sheep or the horses I've cared for. But there's a crossover that I'm interested in—how the body responds when it's removed from the city and placed in a field, or a pasture, or the dark backwoods of Pennsylvania. I'm reminded of a time, in late November, when I was moving the sheep onto a new plot of grass and clover. As I adjusted the fence, I looked up to see all four of them turned away from me, watching the sun set. This wasn't the first time I'd shared the quiet stillness of watching a sunset with another animal, and it won't be the last. I write about this in "Holmes Lake," which ends:

> I wonder if all
>
> these animals look at the sky and see something
> that I never will. I think I could spend
>
> my whole life trying to find it.

To return to the blood on the pine chips, in these lines I'm also approaching another impulse of my work, which is desire, or longing. Here, it's a complicated impulse: it's the desire of observation, despite the knowledge of the loss that would come with it. Other forms of desire also come with loss: "So this is life without you, // so this—." Love, inevitably, is present alongside death. In poems, I approach both in connection with animals: "Night wears your sweat / like an antlered buck // carrying moss." Love, as I conceive it in these poems, is inextricable from landscape. It follows some of the rhythms of seasons: is at first tenuous, then decaying & mournful, and finally rooted in newly blossoming desire. These are poems that attempt to explore what it means to be

both animal and human through observing the physical world—but ultimately, they are also poems about love, and trying to find it.

Ontology no. 1

At first, one might feel that faith is merely a product of love.

The night lies just like the rest of us. I hope for a day when the crops don't fail

but we also get to rest.

You make elegant circles through the field. I've made

a religion out of waiting.

Letting night be night and love

be what it is. What happens between air and light, between moon

and hayfield? Not settling for a partial theory,

I devour love whole.

A Careful Wilderness

Spirals of chimney smoke
and dead things shining—

I hold a cliff in my hands.
I've eaten too much sky.

In the sun today I thought:
what if my legs
turned into snow.

I thought about the way the sky splays the fields
with cooked light,
how Venus blinks this time of year,
and how the river has teeth
and so many tongues.

Every cold morning,
I watch the neighbor's girls leave their house,
pockets full of seeds and bread,
searching the woods for something
that wasn't there yesterday.

I hope to god they find it.

PA-184 Toward Steam Valley

Sudden switches
in direction and weather.

Bends in the road
come as scythes:
falciform, sharpened.

As light ebbs,
hawks loop.
Needly pines
pin themselves to sky.

Farmlands rise, fall—
barns half-eaten
in the dark.

Such symmetry here:
bending and unbending,

cutting through land
toward specific nowheres,
toward home and not-home.

The Barn

I go there now, walk on molding feathers,
dead hen in the corner. Where we held
sweaty hands and pushed together foreheads.
The room where I undressed,
where beside sacks of flour and creased Bible pages
I curled my new and unused body around yours.
Where I shed a teaspoon of blood
now dried on floorboards. Where without reservation
you peeled me like the rind of an unripe fruit, gnats
and barnflies working their way between our torsos.
I know now that things die.
A rotting hen told me. She said, from the corner
of the room: *You know you'll have to start over*.
The barn door's deadbolt still isn't thrown
(my fingers too sore, too stiff) but it won't matter,
you'll never try to get in again. The barn will stay quiet
and continue to rot, and I will remember the mold
growing on that hen as I stand in a hot steaming room,
in light that comes through stacks of dirty dishes,
and I'll remove pieces of myself to boil in cloudy water
and add spine, vertebrae: scraps for a new body
drawn up over breakfast including a detailed map
of every artery & vein and every inch of my skin
that wouldn't have been touched by you.

Out of Bounds

I was in a place I couldn’t define. Along the edges were white crosses, ruptured guardrails. I crossed myself and looked for anything familiar.

After some time, a woman's voice came out of the dark. Trying to see her was like trying to strike a wet match. There was no light, and she never came closer.

The Naming of Things Kept Us Busy

landlocked / deadbolt / dust bowl / house in the middle. We read the entire list at the ceremony. After all, we were so careful about getting everything right, stuck on the word *love* for a day—love, like the failure of the word *lung*, like mineral. A grassy kiss against teeth. Grinning badly by a cactus. The blood dog's bite against your thigh. Finally, we settled: a hand in a room full of hands.

Mid-America Suite

I.

A clanging when shovel
hits rock—*Leave it*

for tomorrow.
They trudge home

to stuff mouths over
tallow candles,

ritualized scratching of
flea-bitten ankles.

When should the mind
give up lamenting?

Only when light fails
do birds stop crying out.

Anyways, I think the horse
is dead.

II.

The man shouts *Stop*
but all they hear is *I want, I want, I want.*

A noisy gurgle from the river
and the weather gets crueler,

the tractor starts up again.

III.

Like the way wheat is
says the farmer looking at his farm, then
at his wife digging her boot into dirt.

In the beginning, everywhere

there was a sound like eagles
but it was just the bushes
wishing they could fly.

Like the wheat, says the farmer.
Like the corn.

Unrequited Love Pantoum

I wake up with the flowers you gave me
in the dream. When it rains like this,
I think of you in the corn. How all year
we read weather like the holy book.

In the dream, when it rains like this,
church bells crawl through the window.
I read weather like the holy book
until night comes on black stilts.

Church bells crawl through the window
and into my body which shudders
until night comes. On black stilts
I walk through the dream

and into my body, which shudders
like a dog left out in the cold.
I walk: through the dream
I find you, hunting through fields

like a dog. Left out in the cold
for too long, you shiver my name when
I find you. Hunting through fields
of corn, we rest periodically.

For too long, you shiver my name. When
light breaks there's a sound like rustling
corn. We rest. Periodically
the dream repeats: over and over,

light breaks. A rustling sound:
you, in the corn. All year
the dream repeats. Over and over
you give me flowers, which disappear when I wake.

The Town

Someone had told us that in the forest by the lake lived replicas of everyone in the town. We decided to search for them, and did so slowly and mathematically. Along the way we found new, unused bicycle parts, boxes of teeth and bones, and dozens of mirrors wrapped in cellophane. Every object was a clue that we inspected inch by inch.

At a place where the ground splits into a narrow gorge, we climbed the steep center and found a young couple groping each other above a creek bed. We asked them for directions but they didn't pay any attention to us, only twisting their bodies together more intricately. There were more couples upstream, and on the other side of the gorge we found a whole town, but no one looked familiar. We never found ourselves, but we'll keep looking.

Milkstone

Night wears your sweat
like an antlered buck

carrying moss.
Another wine glass breaks,

accidentally tapped
against the kitchen faucet.

Out in the dark,
a goat is bleating—

a milkstone
lodged in her udder.

The night flees on hooves.

Apology

You wished for rain and then it was there.
Down in the pasture, the horse
was shaking water off its coat. The house
brimmed over with light.

*

I slept. I dreamed the house was a little boat:
no land in sight, the sail a tattered, broken wing.

*

I woke to wind, and for some time lay still.
When the lights blinked out, we finally spoke.
I forget what was said.
It could have been anything.

Sorry Cento

I wanted to stay as I was,
pulling arrows out of my heart
so you would not depart, so I would not
for the hundredth hundredth time
stand sullenly in the slowly whitening
nowhere.
Today I sing alone
through a forest of empty armor.
One day after another—
how endless your not-returning,
where I am and am not.

We've Been Saying Goodbye All Morning

The gulls in the parking lot say *yeah, yeah,*
yeah. Something about praying. Something
about stars spinning. The wind coming out
of the trees. The body shuddering like it does.
Taking your hand and holding it like I did
that one night, like I meant to do again.
Now: strike a match and augur what's coming.
Augur the snow falling on the roof, boots
heaped in the mud room, a bright afternoon,
windows steaming, the last things we said
knocking quietly around in our insides.

Lighthouses

I had this feeling that my hands were becoming lighthouses. My doctor suggested that I go see an actual lighthouse—to better understand their size, and the impossibility of my hands turning into them. I drove to the coast of Maine where all the best lighthouses are and found the perfect one: huge and white, jutting out of sharp rock where waves crashed. Suddenly understanding my mistake and deeply embarrassed, I turned around and walked back to my car. My hands were heavy steeple bells ringing at my sides.

End of Sorrows

Still it's snowing, and they have coffee. They put on their pants and shirts and do things to their faces. She craves a cigarette—quit months ago, but there's a pack hidden in her underwear drawer next to the Bible. She has one, and the taste of ash and smoke in her mouth is almost too much, too good. She says out loud: *Who am I to deserve this? What have I done? What will I do?*

The snow stops. Through the house's one small window, in the distance, they see something coming over the hills—some altitudinous beast that hadn't been there the last time they looked. Except they knew that it had.

Red Ocher

> "Red ochre—Fe2O3—is a simple compound of iron and oxygen that absorbs yellow, green and blue light and appears red. It's what makes red paint red. It's really cheap because it's really plentiful. And it's really plentiful because of nuclear fusion in dying stars."
> *- Smithsonian Magazine, "Barns Are Painted Red Because of the Physics of Dying Stars"*

To paint the barn bloody.

After all that planting, the peppers rot off the vine.

Wind was once oil. Soil has memories.

What's lost in the retelling.

To fall apart or believe.

The farmer, filling the wheelbarrow with sawdust, remembering last year's weather: *That was a different God*.

What the wasp dragging its half-severed tail knows about sorrow.

The swollen leg; the rotten tooth.

An iron ore used as pigment.

The man who goes outside to feed the hogs and becomes the meal.

How the sky pulls on a body in pain; in love.

Night, a collapsed star.

Night, a buck's splintered antlers.

Night, stealing the lock from the horse's stall door.

The grief you are born with.

Lord, there's a snake growing out of my chest but I don't claim it.

A battle-bruised skeleton.

The part of the body composed of thunder and faith.

To inherit trauma like a wedding ring.

The storm; the pine shaking; the rope that keeps the boat knocking up against the dock.

To glance ghost. To taste gun.

To become what you found in the attic when you were young.

The silo collapsing like it was waiting for love that never came.

A bear cub gnawing its own mother’s bones.

Did you see the blood in the snow?

Not Poem

Not child.
Not straw hair or toy soldiers.
Not walking to the mailbox at the end of the road
with the dog at your heels.
Not, not the green sky.
Not gravy crusted to the pan.
Not the bent wings of birds
or the gnarl of your great-aunt's hands.
Not fearing the attic, its spilled pink insulation.
Not fields. Not frost-covered ground.
Not the biting chill in the hayloft
where you laid yourself down,
aligned your eye with a crack in the floorboard
to watch the stillness of the milking-cow below.
That body, now: not-cow.
Not warm breath or hay-smell, a hand against her flank.
Not to say: memory is a sealed room,
the barn preserved, your eye still molded to wood.
And not to confuse history
with fortune, augured writings on the wall.
Not to marry the barn or to burn it.
Not even to know how.

Poem for When You Realize That You'll Never Look at Brussels Sprouts the Same Way Again

When you've spent hours picking them
off their thick stalks thinking he doesn't love you,
will never love you, did he ever even
love you, November weeds wild around you
like you're some kind of frost-summoned half-god-
half-goat, and the cold slices your cracked fingers
and etches the cracks deeper, stinging, drawing blood,
and the white bucket that you drag from stalk to stalk
stays mostly empty, the plants bug-eaten
and yielding less each day.
There are many ways of living.
One is with a hole inside of you that never gives
or forgives. Another is to collect memories
as if they're shards of light in what is otherwise pitch-dark.
The buds snap off the stalk like a moose's heavy antlers
shedding in winter. Moments of light:
every slanted balcony in Syracuse. The smell
of brussels sprouts in the oven on Thanksgiving.
Cate running to fill someone's wine glass in the living room.
Cooking by yourself in your small kitchen in Lincoln,
organic sprouts washed and spread
across the cutting board. Their imperfections—
browned edges, insect tracks. You eat a bowl full of them
and think of people you've loved:
your aunt, a thousand miles away and not speaking to you,
who you want to ask: *When did you first know*
your own sadness? On Friday you go to your therapist's office
and talk about light, about feeling like you're fractured
by light, and she writes and says yes and says okay
and you drive home in the egg-yolk yellow evening light
and cook dinner. Later, wine-drunk and stoned, you talk
to the ceiling fan and curl your body around the sound of trains
roaring their way into the deep Nebraskan prairie.
Winter light. Lover's light. The way light and shadow slanted
across the vegetable field in September, October,
November. The light that glittered in the rainwater
inside the plants' cupped leaves. The light
that fills you now, knowing the things you know,
forgiving yourself the rest.

Dementia Song

for Gus

The pressing of things
against windows.

Your mother sings
as winter sours the sills,

moss green carpet seeps
into your feet.

Inside the little house,
someone screaming at the door;

the furnace in the cellar
shaking; the floor

covered in mountains,
the gramophone spilling grain.

And boats, out of nowhere,
rocking—And O, how they sing.

Chores

Given that the night and the flesh are cold.
Given that the rope is good and strong
and the tractor starts without choke.

The horse is buried
before first light.

His stall stays empty three days. After which
new sawdust is forked,
a mare led in from the top field.

Weeks go by.
Weather shifts, heaves its weight
against the hedgerow.
The farm rises and falls
like a chest.

One morning
a hawk comes into the barn—
young red-tail, brown spotted belly—and for an hour
he flies back and forth between haystacks
making shadows of the barn lights,
pausing chores in their rhythm of shovel, pitch, shovel
before finding his way again.

Greenbrier

Youth Conservation Corps, Laurel Highlands, age 16

That one summer we spent trying to defeat the weeds—
knocking vines back from trail edges, arms slashed

by thorns, muscles turned gummy from the hedge clipper's tremor
or the endless pull of a fire rake. There was a boy I liked on the crew

who liked another girl and spent the summer chasing her,
faked a convincing look of sympathy the day she came in crying,

having finally broken up with her boyfriend of two years.
Still—they never got together, and I kept up my quiet pining,

noticed how naturally he loped over craggy maintenance trails,
felt stoned studying his large hands and the way they gripped tools,

only started to name the current that awed through me
when I thought about those hands in other places.

One morning we hiked three miles to the bottom of Grove Run
and found a thicket of greenbrier so dense that one of us turned around

and went back for more equipment, the rest falling easily into a choreography
of cutting and raking, taste of gasoline filling our mouths. As we worked

we spread out, losing sight of one another—far enough, eventually,
that noise vanished too and the woods

seemed to grow, the thorny plants multiplying, swallowing us whole.
At lunchtime I threw my rake down and began the slow hike upward,

taking my time, to where our packs were dropped. Near the top of the trail,
I turned around a switchback and saw him:

his body at an angle, leg slightly bent,
hands held loosely around the root of himself

as he took a piss into the brier he'd been cutting. I backtracked,
holding my breath behind a knot of maples until he'd finished,

my heart a clatter of hooves, trees falling inside my ears.
All summer that moment stayed with me while we continued

not falling in love. His stance, the bald frankness of it—
the soft of him open to the sun. The blush that heated my face

every time I thought of him, of his hands cradled as if praying, repenting
to the light that poured down, to the glowing sea of green

we'd come there to kill—and afterward, the metallic sound of a zipper
coming through the trees and rocketing into me.

Limerence

When I’m leaving the field,
you'll start loading the wagon.

A trail of dust is a trail of love.

I'll hold onto you
like a rope tied to the horizon of a vast desert.

Every morning, I clutch to my chest a piece of glass
wrapped in paper and hogweed.

One day there will be a sun that shows us its teeth
and we’ll be afraid, but grateful.

Thaw

Evening.
A buck's antlers cradle light
at the edge of a field.
Snow has cleared
to show hard-packed mud,
grass kept green, phlox
and dog-tooth violets
pushing up tentative stalks.
The buck pauses to drink snowmelt
beside a wind-split tree.
As he lifts his heavy head,
evening's shifting light
casts shadows—a labyrinth
of root and horn.

Birth

In the winter I walked the desert, tending to every small animal I came across. I'd been slowly forgetting words. After a hundred miles I found a crater, and at the bottom of it a dozen mirrors, all in various degrees of warp and cloud. I looked into each of them and practiced saying things: *strawbelly. Thunderwood. Barnfather*. The word for the kind of weather that's like milk but clearer—what was that? I would plant seeds at the center, I decided, and as they grew they would dutifully tell me their names. But at night I dreamed that where the seeds were sown, tufts of hair sprouted from the soil; then crowns of blood-slick heads, neatly erupting in rows. Eventually the crater filled with a chorus of wordless squeals as I ran along the rows, watering the dozen babies I'd born.

Ontology no. 2

The brain makes a room for music. Before there was paint,

there was bone. No one knows

what dreams demand. Last night I fastened a necklace made of stars

dripping cold milk. You moved through shifting boxes

of hay and smoke.

In the morning I open the barn doors to the smell of horse piss, lemon,

hawk and wind. To hear the daily soft sounds of love,

you have to know when to listen.